

Sweet wine responses

24 Nov 2004 by JR

Yehuda Shapiro, France:

In this weekend's FT you suggested we need a better term than 'sweet wine' or 'dessert wine'. In Montpellier the other week I came across a menu of 'vins moelleux'. Sounded (and tasted) good to me. 'Moelleux' is a wonderfully French word, so hopefully people would be dissuaded from attempting to find the English equivalent.

Erica de Graaff-Hunter, Mallorca, Spain:

Re your fascinating article in Saturday's FT on sweet wines: Since I cannot get any of those mentioned here - and couldn't afford £70 a bottle, if I could! - can you recommend a comparable Sauternes-type Spanish wine? I have experimented, but disastrously. They were all horrid; insipid and sickly sweet. Many thanks in advance, and also for all the help and advice!

Ignacio Gomez Montejo, Spain:

Very good your column today in the FT. A pity you did not mention the Spanish Pedro Ximenez sweet wine, which at a typical price of 8 euros a bottle is probably much better value than most of the others you mention.

Phil Roberts, Singapore:

Your article in this weekend's FT on sweet whites was timely: these versatile wines are seriously undervalued by most wine drinkers. The producers have a lot of work to do. Wine drinkers need to be made aware that fine botrytised whites bear as much likeness to sugared white confections as, well, fine wine to plonk.

A few years ago I was fortunate to dine at Ch Nairac. The fact that it was a glorious summer's evening helped no doubt, but was only incidental. The meal consisted of four courses:

- A chilled vichysoisse
- Pate de foie gras
- A single, large cep, simply cooked, with only its own juices
- Fresh strawberries

It doesn't sound like a very substantial meal, but it was as filling as it was delicious. With each course a different vintage of the Château's wine was served - and each matched its dish wonderfully well. If these wines are going to be popularised, some organised tastings with matching food will be essential. It will be a long haul, but the producers have everything to gain.

David Schildknecht, US:

A propos nomenclature, despite the many guttural and mongrel expressions that the German wine language has inflicted

on wine enthusiasts, I find the term Edelsüss both euphonious and useful. I think, then, that we could do worse than adopt the English expression "nobly sweet" in referring to sweet wines produced through the action of botrytis. Certainly the term "dessert wine"

has been misleading and harmful as a means of calling attention to such wines.

A propos the degree to which such luminaries as Lur Saluces, Müller, Kracher and Szepsy might be out of touch with the vast majority of consumers, the fact is that these are among the few outstanding vintners in their respective regions whose wines have a well-recognized value as collectibles. And self-styled collectors are usually considerably more creative in their hunt for the rare and highly rated libation than they are in employing it at table.

I don't wish to minimize the value of any of these gentlemen's great wines for purposes of vinous meditation, that is to say served solo. In fact, most of the bottles of low alcohol, rivetingly complex Scharzhofberger I have personally drained, whether on the Saar or at home in the States, were unaccompanied. And anyone who could have found something missing on those occasions would probably also bemoan the lack of continuo or orchestral parts in Bach's violin partitas.

Still, it is vital for the survival of nobly sweet wine culture - perhaps

not of a tiny fringe of illustrious vintners, but certainly for any talents who follow in their wake - that consumers develop the imaginative habit of serving them in the widest appropriate range of circumstances and culinary settings. There have surely never in recent history - if ever - been so many vintners conscientiously farming the ideal terroir for nobly sweet grapes, then making the sacrifices and employing the care necessary to transform these into great wine. Indeed, it is hard to name a major growing region for such wines - whether the western Loire, Tokaj, Burgenland, or the

Mosel and its tributaries - that has not undergone something of a sweet wine renaissance in recent decades. But from observing these regions - as I do first hand every year - I fear that their qualitative revival will be short-lived unless the drinking habits of wine lovers worldwide change to accommodate these wines and reward the hard, meticulous labours of vintners who wait for and work with botrytis.

Ideal "wines of meditation" these nobly sweet elixirs may well be, but in life's maelstrom, I doubt I am the only person with little time for getting in touch with my inner self or entering a state of wonder. As a matter of fact, for me, time spent in the kitchen or at table is the closest I come to either, which only redoubles my determination to employ the fruits of noble terroir and rot on such occasions.

Your list is a good start, Jancis, but many other food groups will reward exploration. Not just lobster, as Lur Saluces suggested, frequently works well here, but also other shellfish that are both inherently briny and sweet. Tokaj is locally successfully paired with oily local sturgeon or even catfish. In these instances and in fact in general, it is as much how the food is prepared as it is any inherent affinity of food and wine families that makes for a synergistic pairing on the palate, and the incorporation of buttered pastry or of fruits, or the caramelization of ingredients can lead many dishes in a botrytis-friendly direction. Try a nobly sweet wine to complement the bitterness and nuttiness of greens and oils along with a dried or otherwise concentrated fruit component in a salad, and you might decide you have happened on the one course in a meal most likely to suit such unctuous libations. (Around my house, a salad is often the only "other" course we have time for, and nobly sweet rieslings or

chenins are frequent favourites.) Having said it's more a matter of

preparation than ingredients though, I almost forgot to note that any rich concentration of mushrooms in a dish bids fair to salute its distant fungal relative in the glass.

Finally, don't ever overlook nor think it unduly profligate or blasphemous to pour a bit of nobly sweet wine into your sauces or incorporate them into sorbet or ice cream. A little bit can go a magically long way.

Santé!

me:

Lots of food for thought there, and much appreciated it is too. I would never have thought of salads with sweet wine but

obviously must experiment.

And I like the way that the question from Mallorca is so neatly answered from the Spanish mainland. I tasted a VERY clever dark, strong, sweet wine recently. **Sticky Pudding Wine** is a Pedro Ximenez from sherry producers Barbadillo packaged to appeal to the Haagen-dazs market rather than the average sherry drinker. It's extremely sweet and almost syrupy but has the heartening green rim of a wine kept for years in wood (an average of four or five, according to the producers). So the price tag of £6.49 per snazzy half-litre is pretty good. There's just the slightest hint of astringence on the finish to keep the tasting experience a lively one. I'm told that for the moment the only place this clever wine is available is at 200 top Sainsbury's stores in the UK. Certainly Ignacio G M is absolutely right that sweet sherry is probably the best-value sweet wine in the world today. Even better value, and almost as well packaged if not labelled, is **Marks & Spencer's Rich Cream Sherry** from Williams and Humbert which costs £4.99 usually and is on special offer at just £3.99 03 nov-30 nov. This is 17 per cent alcohol to Sticky Pudding's 19 per cent - it's not a PX syrup but an old oloroso sherry from a solera established 20 years ago and the makers claim the average age of the wine is more than 10 years. What a silly price then! (See [Peñín's best-value wines of Spain](#).)

Rodrigo Mainardi, Brazil:

I would add to Ms. Erica de Graaff-Hunter these already recommended by you, the sweet wines of Chivite, especially Coleccion 125 from Navarra, and Molino Real from Telmo Rodriguez. His simpler (and less expensive) wine Moscatel M.R. was good enough to be selected for the gala dinner in the Spanish royal wedding. I think it is amazing how the Coleccion 125, a wine made with Muscat, resembles a good sauternes.